

THE MEDIATED CITY

DRAWING AS A THIRD PARTY PHENOMENA

Examining the metropolis as a contested concept, offering a platform for multiple and diverse examinations of the city to multiply and reconfigure our readings of the city.

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ON REMEMBRANCE

In the spring of 2009 Nicolas Bourriaud proposed the term ‘Altermodernism’ announcing a new era following Postmodernism to describe aesthetic proposals critically engaging with an increasingly global context [1]. This ‘new’ term is deployed as an explorative platform in search of a 21st century modernism, very different from Postmodernism for example, which is setting us after or outside the historic period of modernism. As such, Altermodernism does not exist in linear reference to a previous timeframe yet acknowledges history as a network of intersecting timelines where it becomes increasingly more difficult to think and thus design outside or after history yet much more appealing to sustain within its mesh of time. John Ruskin describes in his sixth chapter of the ‘Seven Lamps of Architecture’ [2] the importance of a narrative capacity implicit to architecture and urban design. In this pursue of story telling, architecture thus exemplifies its capacity to engage with the idea of recall, setting up a state of remembrance for its users. He describes the architectonic body, in line with literature, to perform as part of a cumulative memory underlining the memorial and monumental values of our built environment. Very much in line with writing, this conveyance of historical information is described to perform in the stone surfaces shrouding space where metaphors, in the form of ornamentation, support its users ‘remembrance’.

As children after modernism we have learned to deliberately dislocate and abstract historical associations in favour of an industrial vocabulary, celebrating concepts of objectifying abstraction.

If we do however engage with historical tradition such as in Ruskin’s oeuvre we find ourselves locked into a taxonomy of styles, isolated from a present and contemporary discourse. Even Ruskin eventually recognises his stylistic legacy of the Pseudo-Gothic to have resulted, as he describes, “*in an accursed Frankenstein monster of my own making*” [3].

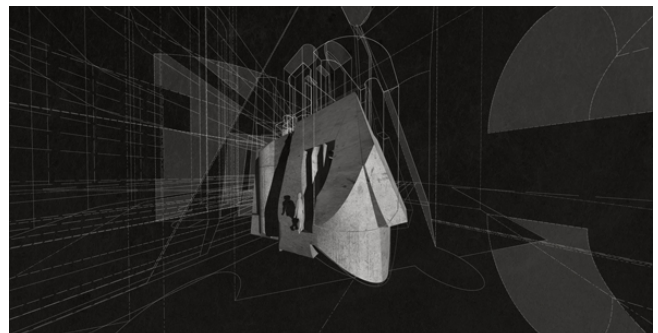


Fig 1, 2; *The Keepers Cenotaph* by Ephraim Joris, London, 2013: drawing historical traces to cast a figure

As a conduit into modes of reading the city as part of a cumulative memory, we (Architecture Project) propose a critical attitude towards the representational tools by which we design, analyse and describe urban space, both in practice and education. More in particular how classical representational tools (i.e. plan, section, elevation), in line with architectural professional codes, combined with modes of phenomenological reading through autographic media aim to install its users ‘remembrance’.

In this article, I seek to unpack the need to juxtapose material ideas and concepts against layers of historical and social information when we, as designers, work within an urban fabric. Through the commentary of a selection of our drawings, this is explained as a process of inclusion, aiming to incorporate a multitude of

contextual information, seen and unseen, particular to a site and across different timeframes. Important here is that spatial compositions, embracing memorial and monumental values, do hold qualities of 'strangeness' and stand explicitly different against their material setting. As such, any iconic linkage is avoided, supporting the driving principle of dislocating form from its conventionally associated meaning or symbolic value, without denying the presence of such values [4].

PLURALITY OF SYSTEMS OF INTERPRETATION

In a world where memory has become part of a global culture the social act of remembering has changed in our recent history. Not so long ago history provided relative stability in its representations of past events. This stability has been shattered and '*today we think of the past as memory without borders rather than national history within borders*'; *today memory is understood as a mode of re-presentation and as belonging to the present.*' [5]

Through the work of our practice (Architecture Project) we engage with the idea of the past performing through the present. Such practice is not marked by the design of explicit memorials tied to official histories of specific communities; yet aims at a process of including residues of (perhaps mythical) narratives when we design new urban interventions. As such, our work does not want to gravitate towards designing places for exception yet involves designing places of the everyday. In recent work, and perhaps in seeming conflict with the previous statement, our work references ideas on mortality, not so much to commemorate the death but to instill a specific experiential, sensory quality. A quality we have all experienced when we pass a grave and are confronted with death as we become conscious of the presence of human remains. In this moment we experience a halt in our everyday life and seem to be carried to another place [6], a place usually submerged within the self. In this moment time collapses to a dense mesh through which we experience a lingering consciousness stretching into an immensity of time-space; a vastness approaching a state of nullity. It is such description of monumentality, as incalculable enormity, we have been looking for, to complement the annotation of the material with a phenomenological monumentality; in such a way that a certain place or object allows us to feel or perceive something beyond itself.

It is thus important for us to set ourselves outside the practice of designing exceptional spaces in that such spaces often become substitute environments upon which political agendas are transposed unavoidably diminishing the richness and diversity of individual experience. We contemplate architecture and urban design freed from compensating moralizing tactics for it cannot embody any truths or act as a correction of life (such as in war memorials). Architectonic body does not have to warn or remind us, but can remain 'empty' and in doing so become endlessly more forceful.

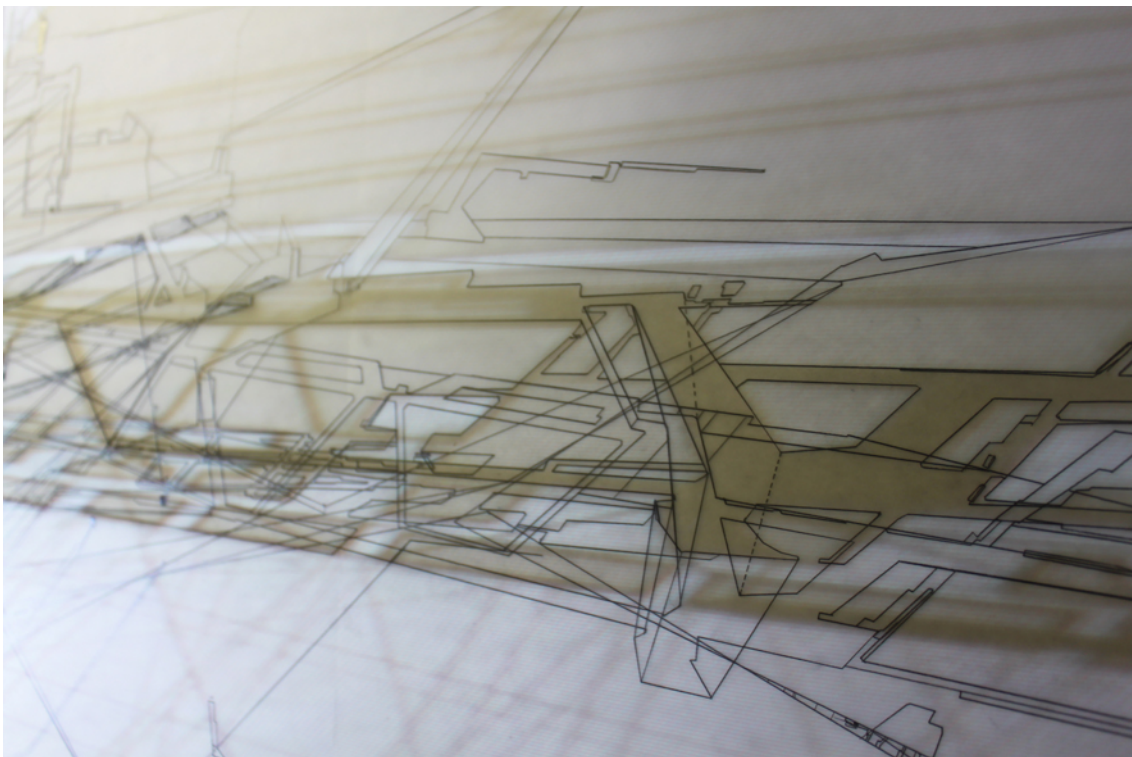


Fig 3; *The Gate Drawings* by Riet Eeckhout,, 2013: drawing historical traces to define new field conditions

“How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?” exclaims Maurice Merleau-Ponty at the start of his seven lectures on science and perception [7]. Around the same time, Jean-Paul Sartre states Architecture to mediate between the outer and the inner worlds by means of its suggestive and mediating metaphors [8]. This metaphorical performance does not limit itself to a symbolizing relationship; the metaphor is implicit to the world and spaces we inhabit. As designers we aim at such mediating performance to gaze at the world and our being in it as we draw and model space. Architecture, and urbanism as such, is a performing event.

‘Gaston Bachelard introduces in his 1957 *La poétique de l’espace* the concept of topo-analysis [9]; ‘a psychoanalysis of places’, in such, studying our phenomenological relationship with places. The object of study here is not merely architecture; the aim is to study how space (that what exists within and around architecture) accommodates consciousness or as Bachelard denotes; *reverie*. A consciousness accommodated by a collapse of time; where multiple pasts and present come together. Any attempt to locate this moment however, would allow us to understand the placeless-ness of this event. Past and present do not come together in one point. Any definition of such point would be a falsifying act. As designers, interested in generating structures of consciousness, as we study our spatial being, we can only enter an incalculable enormity to experience vastness beyond any point.

TRACING THE PERFORMANCE OF SPACE

Our practice, like most others, is often led by preconceived sculptural images as we mediate within a network of intersecting timelines. They manifest themselves as figurations lingering in the poesis of each project. As part of our design method, we strive for a resistance of these figurations and eliminate implicit figurative qualities by deploying a drawing discourse of ‘replay’, as I will explain later, through which we include a multiplicity of historical data yet subtract any form of narrative which would lead to figuration. We use the term figuration to denote levels of conventionally associated meaning or symbolic value; often through the use of archetypical historicised elements in the composition of cities; something we thus want to avoid. This sets up a practice of paradox; negotiating the architectonic body as figure in the storey telling of place yet resisting figuration (avoiding a subordination to the preconceived image) and therefore designing presence through levels of absence. Projects born out of this practice exist as ‘circulatory systems’ including video, sound, drawing and writing with the aim to define a broad practice-platform with a central methodological concern; language as primary material - designing the figure freed from its figurative role.

This drives a design discourse where iconic linkages are avoided, supporting the aim of dislocating form from its conventionally associated meaning [3]. To establish this, drawings have become instruments of internal dialogue [10]. They guide a process of discovery setting up a continual recording of boundaries as a graphical manipulation of a site or volume. These recordings, subject to site-specific parameters, seen and unseen and across different timeframes, set up a multifaceted interchange between drawing and context yet aim at repressing any passive recording of nostalgic clichés. The outcome negates the creation of an architectural metaphorical mark (buildings as symbols or icons) and instead aims for the description of a new and highly contextual object/landscape supporting a state of remembrance; reciprocating an active gaze towards history interweaving multiple pasts with present.

As intrinsic part of this practice the drawing is used as detour, only to arrive at a more direct interest in the mediating metaphorical performance of spaces. Here we look at symbolising relationships freed from the picturesque. We do this by drawing through levels of sensation rather than drawing representations of an a priori formal vocabulary (historicised archetypes). Symbolising relationships in space are explored through ‘the making visible of forces’, sequentially moulding form. One could look at this drawing practice as an aesthetic sensing of forces within the space of the drawing to trace the performance of a given or designed space. As children of a modern world we have become very distant to such practice. However it is important to remind us that for certain cultures throughout history such practice has been on the foreground. To illustrate, we could look at differences between ancient languages. In Anglo-Saxon sentence structure the verb is subordinate to the noun for example. This partly supported the development in western civilisation of an enlightened view of the world where a Cartesian understanding of things allows us to describe the world as the relationship between objects. So when we speak of a ‘house’ in English we denote an object or a cluster of objects. With this, we can identify a principle keystone to the inherent characteristic of a consumer society wherein everything can be defined as an object [11], even the sensory aspects of life, ultimately to be turned into quantifiable commodities. As designers we have trained ourselves to think and work through

concepts of objectifying abstraction to describe and engage with abstract space; privileging the objective over the element of experienced space [12].

When we look at the Hebrew language for example we can see a sentence structure where the noun is subordinate to the verb. When we speak of 'house' in Hebrew we denote a performance and not an object. Therefore 'house' becomes 'housing' and the idea of an abstracted object is replaced by the idea of a performing space.

Our preoccupation with sensation is not only a strategy to look at experienced space but also allows us to proclaim a feeling of discontent, of a disagreement of form, of current form as a normative formal language; a guiding force in our consumerist apparatus. As such, the drawing exists in a state of destruction claiming back territory of freedom from this normative imprisonment. At the same time it exists in a state of becoming, of en-forcing new form towards unimagined spaces. In the drawing of these spaces, or more specifically the drawing towards these spaces, different levels of figuration are mediated. The architectonic figure could be described as signifying form deeply embedded in a cultural language. Figures could be archetypal elements such as sash windows, front porches, pitched roofs or clock towers. When we speak of negotiating the architectonic body, as figure yet resisting figuration in the storytelling of place, the none-figurative is not accomplished through abstraction but through a process of isolation and replay.

ISOLATION AND REPLAY

As I watched my son, seated on the dusty steps of a vacant building, somewhere in the centre of Brussels, staring with awe to 4 cranes performing a ballet of demolition, I witnessed something wonderful. After an hour of uninterrupted gazing he stood up and walked to his pram to pick up his toy-crane, once seated again he started to re-enact the witnessed spectacle with his toy-crane. It seemed he had become so engulfed by this performance he needed to process his viewing of the world through replay.

In general, our drawing discourse is initiated by isolating a figure from its original narrative framework. With 'The Gate Drawings' the first 'act' of the drawing entails a minute manual tracing of historical information on the site as historical drawings and film footage are projected onto a drawing board. The process of tracing repeats itself multiple times to create series of densely stratified drawings. *"Projecting onto a drawing board at large scale and sitting at the pixel end of the image, allows one to reside in a position so close to the representation that one can only see parts of the totality. In this instance, one is not able to reflect and take critical decisions (informed decisions), one is only able to surrender uncritically to what is visible in close up, and cannot relate the pixel to the exact representational categories they belong to. One starts to engage with a thinking process resisting the representational".* [13]

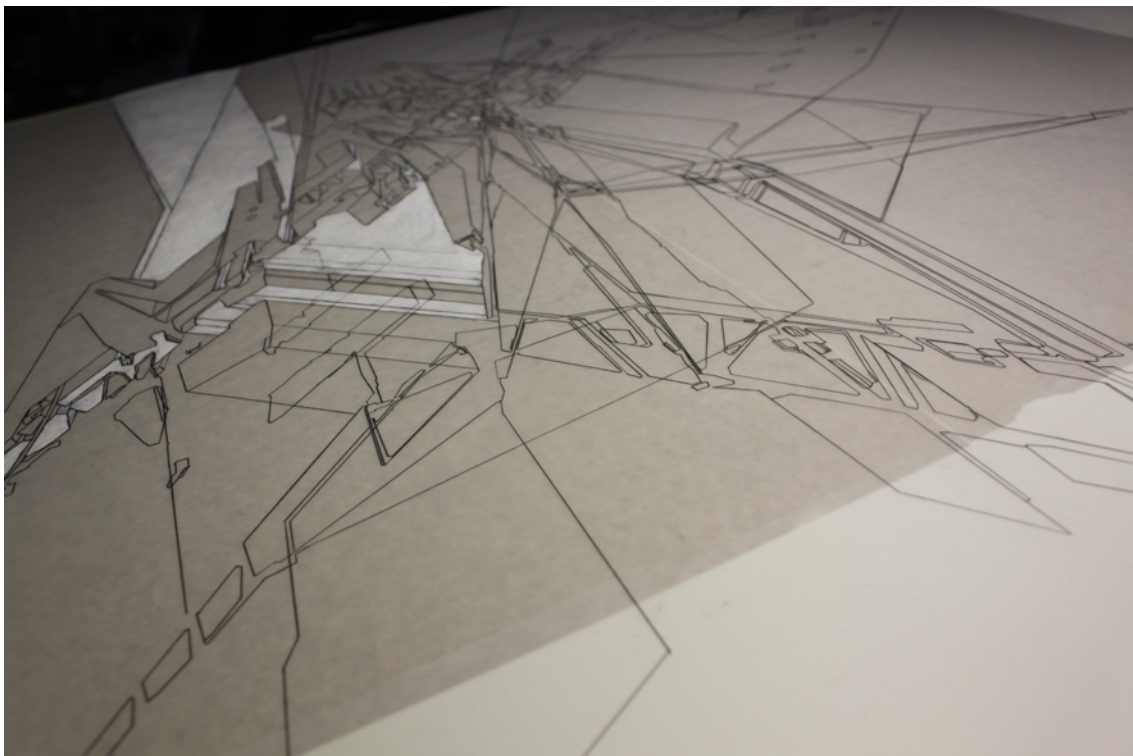


Fig 4; The Gate Drawings by Riet Eeckhout, 2013: drawing historical traces to define new field conditions

As such, the figure (and with it, the person drawing the figure) is placed in an empty field allowing the drawing of the figure to become site. Within this field, the act of drawing accommodates the tracing of forces through which a process of reconfiguration takes place. The isolation of the figure does not install inertia yet accommodates a looking, an exploration of the figure within the operative field of the drawing. Through the isolation of the figure, its relational symbolic ties are momentarily broken and the figure becomes image. In Lacanian terms, the figure trans-locates from the symbolic order to the imaginary order or what has been described as the pre-mirror state; the moment in the psychological development of a child where it fails to recognise itself in the mirror yet only sees the image of another child. One could say that through this process of drawing, a momentary state of psychosis is established where the figure becomes image, disrupting any relation to signified meaning. Here the act of figuration has been compromised and the drawing enters a state of the figural, as described by Foucault [14]. In this state of the figural (the non-figurative yet non-abstract) relations between image and object are broken. The image as such, does not illustrate the object anymore and becomes pure image. The drawing in this momentary state of psychosis halts the act of figuration in the performance of the drawing and instead submits the image as image without reference but to itself. Such image accommodates an inwards looking and reveals a self-exploring figure. With this type of drawing we can invest in sensation freed from the demands of representation and thus pre-set architectural vocabularies. If one describes the pre-set vocabulary within architecture and urban design as a set of figurative figures it is important to understand that the drawing freed from the demand of figuration does not erase the figure. Figures remain present in the drawing however within the drawing there is the emergence of figures freed from figuration.

This state of the drawing; the state of psychosis, dislodged from reality, is only momentarily. In such a way that at certain points the drawing becomes an illustration of architectonic and urban space again. As such, the shift from the representational to pure image is at some point reversed; the drawing shifts from pure image back into a representational state. This moment of the re-representational marks a moment in the drawing where its symbolic relationships are re-established after a process of isolation and replay. This confirms the drawing as detour, only to arrive at the study and design of symbolising relationships in architecture and urban design yet freed from the picturesque, the cliché or the archetype.

With *The Keepers Cenotaph* we worked with a site of historical significance yet suffering greatly from an almost total erasure of its mnemonic properties. The project started with 'visiting' deleted urban scenes, places with ghostly properties connecting our world with an intangible past. [15]. The drawing process starts with the definition of a principal cast, a maximum extrusion in relation to the site's geometry, from which multiple subtractions are taken to cast that-what-is-not, such as references to deleted scenes, hence the not-visible gains presence as void. These subtractions reference tombs and vaults without referring to actual historic objects on site. While the cemetery is a relevant reference in this project the act of objectifying the past is avoided in order to focus more on an aesthetic sensing or replay of dormant histories. We describe the design of such places as the result of composing spaces, objects and times [15].

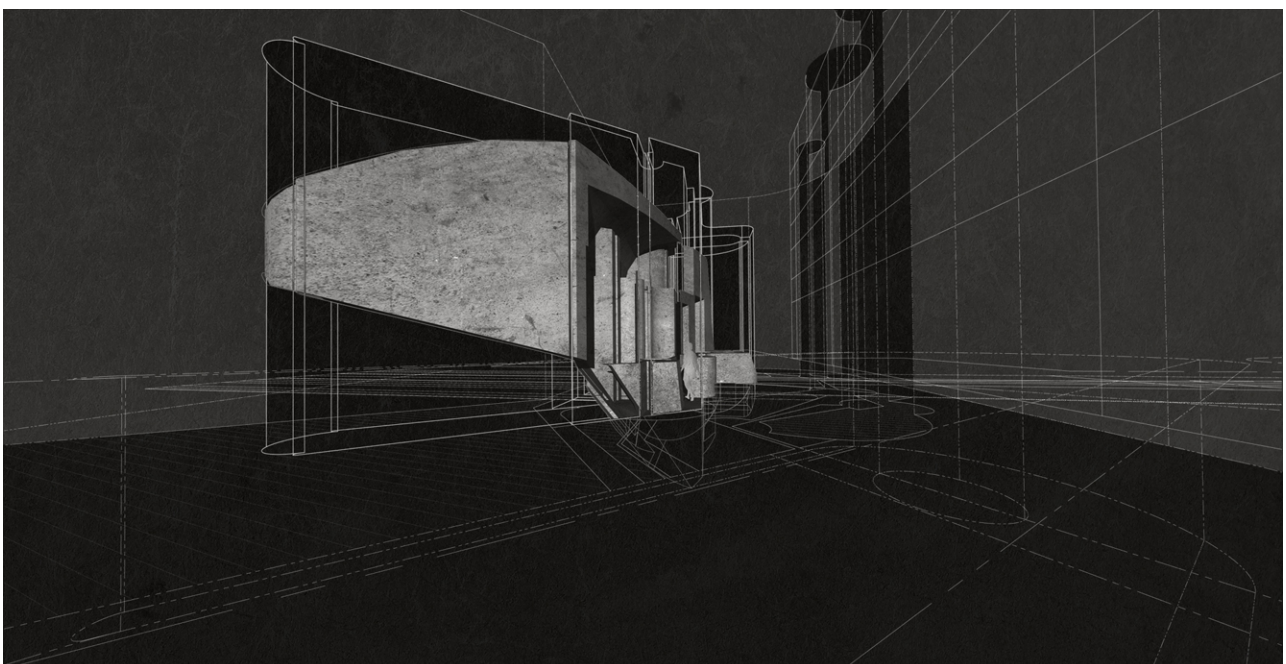


Fig 5; The Keepers Cenotaph by Ephraim Joris, London, 2013: historical traces define interior space

MEDIATING THE CITY

The drawing is not a matter of composing form or harmonies but is occupied with unravelling implicit forces within existing forms and harmonies as found within the city. This implicates the impossibility of new form for it allows only the investigation of forces within form (16). As such the act of drawing engages in the unravelling of forces within the memorial realm of the city in order to bring into presence that what is absent. Paul Klee states in his famous formula 'not render the visible but to render visible'. Similarly, Monet paints forces of light and Bacon paints forces of de-figuration, energies that are invisible unless made evident through third party phenomena such as Newton's apple falling from the tree. We see our drawings as third party phenomena; indirectly making visible, as opposed to typical architectural drawing practice which annotates a projected state of the visible [17].

As we design future states of our urban environment we cultivate a design process of instability, a working towards disremembering the presence of figuration. In order to dislodge the act of figuration from the figure we subject the figure to a process of catastrophe; series of manipulations through projection, retracing and subtraction. Only then are we enabled to reconfigure our readings of the city and work along a path of utmost expedience, only to enable a conversation with the unknown.

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